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ABSTRACT

Although many campus radio stations try to copy or emulate their commercial counterparts, determining who is listening to the station is often difficult. It is not odd for stations to undertake in-house listener surveys, which are often conducted by classes studying audience research. Results of the 1995 College Radio Survey highlight significant points to further understand trends in survey research at college and university radio stations: (1) most of the stations responding to the survey conducted some type of audience research; (2) most respondents described their research as either scientific or careful and accurate; (3) 47% were considering conducting a survey in the future; and (4) average estimates showed that the number of students tuning in at least once a week ranged from 36.7% to 49.2%. Recommendations for use and consideration by those interested in conducting future studies include: conduct a pilot study of the survey; review survey dates to ensure that semester dates are appropriate for population survey; and survey a prorated sample within the population. As college and university radio stations use commercial rating services, they should also consider the impact that such results could have on programming. (Contains seven references, and a figure and a table of data.) (RS)

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# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF SURVEY RESEARCH AT COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY RADIO STATIONS

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Running Head: SURVEY RESEARCH

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# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF SURVEY RESEARCH AT COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY RADIO STATIONS[1]

Although many campus radio stations try to copy or emulate their commercial counterparts, determining who's listening to the station is often difficult to determine. The reality is that most college radio stations can not afford the commercially available "rating services," such as Arbitron or Accu-Ratings. Therefore, it is not odd for stations to undertake in-house listener surveys. Quite often these surveys are conducted by classes studying audience research. While purely scientific research methods are not always employed, the results do at least provide some type of "reading" how the campus or community at-large views the station.

Additionally, quite often the eclectic/alternative formats presented by college and university stations are solely directed at their student body, thus making it hard

[1] This paper is derived from the chapter entitled "Who's Listening to College Radio," contained in the book manuscript The Culture of American College Radio, currently being prepared for The University Press of Kentucky.

to ascertain the often times "mobile" audience. Still though, inherent to the particular needs of campus radio stations (such as pleasing the sponsoring and/or funding group of the station (Knopper, 1994, p. 84)), the station is sometimes under great pressure to determine its current and potential audience.

This paper addresses practical applications of survey research at college and university radio stations. The ideals are presented to understand, initiate, and further develop audience and program research efforts at college radio stations.

## Definition of Terms

Apart from the basic terms for ratings, which will be addressed later, it is first necessary to distinguish between terms utilized in survey research. These will come into play more specifically when a station is viewing the aspects of not only the number of listeners, but such factors as program evaluation, consistency, and validity.

In 1977, in Donald N. Wood and Donald G. Wylie's Educational Telecommunications, the aspects of research, evaluation, and validation were discussed. From the outset, the authors made clear that while the differences between terms cannot be cleanly made and the processes are not that distinct, the definitions make it obvious that there is considerable overlap. As the authors wrote, "less formally we can define research, evaluation, and validation by the sorts of questions that we tend to ask when we are engaged in each of these" (p. 312).

- Research: "The systematic process of objective study and investigation of a problem, using the scientific method and inductive reasoning, in order to establish facts or truths" (p. 312).

Here, we are viewing the actual process of discovering information about something. For our needs, that may be who's listening and how often are they listening. In research, aspects to be investigated fall into three basic categories: (1) Historical Research: Why did this occur, what happened, and what were the causes and effect (both on

the past and present) of this particular event?; (2) Descriptive or Normative Research: How many of this and that are there, is this related to that, and what is the actual situation (or norm)?; and (3) Experimental Research: Does this cause that and can we state any principles or conclusions that add to our broad understanding of a phenomenon (pp. 312-313)?

- Evaluation: "The process of analysis and examination of a specific project, activity, or event, in order to determine future action" (p. 313).

Thus, the distinction is made that evaluation, as compared to research, usually is concerned with appraisal of a specific activity, program, or some other single identifiable thing. For us in broadcasting, this is an important concept in that determination of a future course of action is always important as the end result of any evaluation process. Thus, as a result of evaluation, we can ask such questions as (1) do we continue the program without change; (2) do we modify the program; or (3) do we cancel

the program? In short, are we accomplishing our goals or do we need to change (p. 313)?

- Validation: "The process of determining if predetermined objectives are consistently achieved when a specific instructional unit, a lesson or course, is presented to a target group of [subjects] (who meet certain [] standards)" (p. 313).

Here we become concerned with the aspect of consistency. Basic survey theory purports that two aspects must always be present: reliability and validity. In order to be truly valid, an ideal must first be reliable. In other words, you can have reliability (consistency) without validation (it can be consistently incorrect), but you can not have true validity without reliability (it can not be valid if it is consistently wrong).

In the November 1995 issue of Radio World Magazine, Mike Burnett provided some of the most commonly used/relevant ratings and advertising terms applied to radio. A few of those terms are provided here, specific to use in noncommercial radio:

- AQH -- Average Quarter Hour
- Book -- A rating period. Typically, this covers 12 weeks.
- Cell -- The narrowest demographic bracket. The standard age brackets are 12-17, 18-24, 25-34, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+.
- Cume -- The number of people who tune into a station during a daypart.
- Daypart -- A definition of time in a ratings book (or rate card) that includes time of day and day(s) of the week.
- Demographic -- A particular age and gender bracket
- Demographics -- The age and gender characteristics of a group of people. Note the difference in usage between singular and plural.
- Frequency -- Repetition. How many times the average listener will hear a something.
- Rating -- An estimate of the size of a station's audience expressed as a percentage of the total population of the area being measured. Can be applied to cume or AQH.

- Share -- An estimate of the size of a station's audience expressed as a percentage of the people listening to radio during the daypart (p.44).

## Audience Research Availability

As was earlier stated, the reality is that most college radio stations can not afford the commercially available "rating services." It should be pointed out though that "reduced" rates are available for radio market data from Arbitron for noncommercial stations. The Radio Research Consortium in Silver Spring, Maryland can provide market analysis including audience distribution, cume sharing, and program estimate detail. This data can be used for comparisons between noncommercial stations in the given market, as well as analysis with the market and commercial station data. (Radio Research Consortium, personal communication (letter) to KNTU-FM, University of North Texas, Denton, February 12, 1996.)

Many college and university radio stations perform in-house listener surveys, often conducted by classes studying



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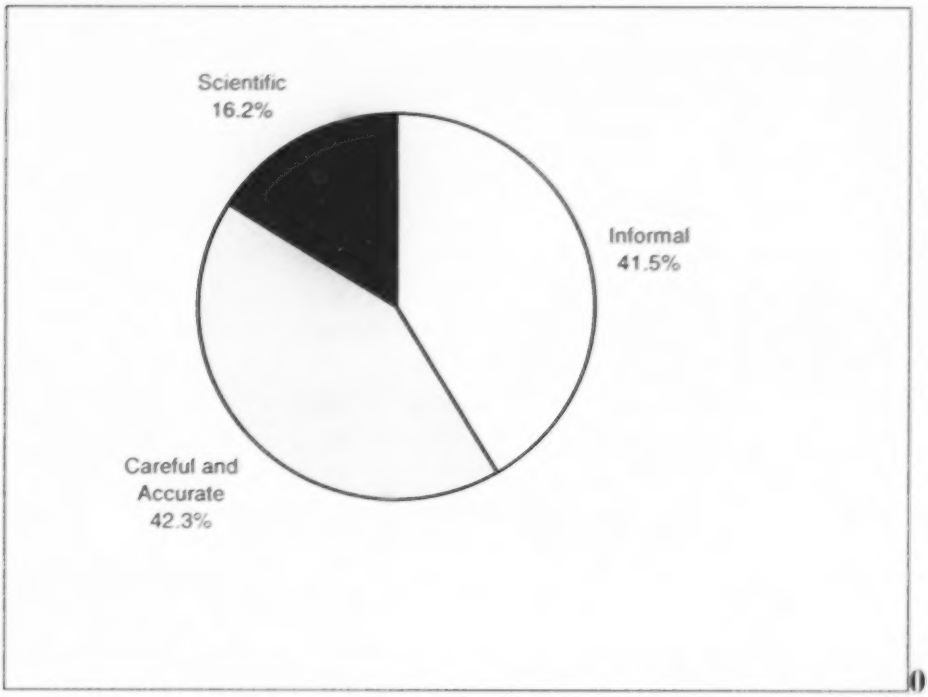
audience research. In order to further understand trends in survey research at college and university radio stations, the findings contained in the 1995 College Radio Survey, conducted by the National Association of College Broadcasters, highlight significant points. Analysis of the survey data offered several considerations for those who deal with audience research and revealed several important characteristics about listening trends of college radio stations.

Most of the stations (65.8 percent) responding to the survey have conducted some type of audience research. For those who had conducted research, 64.0 percent had conducted a station survey, and 34.7 percent had conducted Arbitron (or other industry standard) research. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents who conducted research reported that they had conducted a non-station survey. Most of the respondents described their research as either scientific (16.2 percent) or careful and accurate (42.3 percent), but 41.5 percent described it as informal (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
**Perceived Level of Research Quality**
**(n=130)**




NOTE. From the 1995 College Radio Survey, by National Association of College Broadcasters, p. 26.

Additionally, there is an interest in conducting more research in the future. Forty-seven percent of the respondents were considering conducting a survey in the future, and 20.8 percent were placing top priority on conducting a survey in the future.

Further analysis of the data showed that based upon their best audience research available, 21.6 percent of the respondents estimated that they have a potential audience of 300,000 to 1 million, and 13.2 percent estimated a potential audience of over 1 million.

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents reported an institutional enrollment of 2,500 students or less, and 31.8 percent reported enrollment of more than 10,000 students. The smaller schools had a larger percentage of students in residence.

Average estimates showed that the number of students tuning in at least once a week ranged from 36.7 percent to 49.2 percent. Most respondents reported that the station is available to over 85 percent of their students (see Table 1) (National Association of College Broadcasters, pp. iv-v; 46-47).

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**Table 1**
**Student Listening Rates**

| Number of Students | Percentage of Students Receiving Station | Percentage Listening at Least Once a Week |
|---|---|---|
| 2,500 or less (n=57/49) | 95.4% | 49.2% |
| 2,501 to 5,000 (n=26/20) | 89.2 | 36.7 |
| 5,001 to 10,000 (n=23/13) | 88.8 | 41.2 |
| 10,001 to 20,000 (n=30/19) | 86.1 | 37.6 |
| Over 20,000 (n=20/14) | 88.0 | 39.6 |

NOTE. From the 1995 College Radio Survey, by National Association of College Broadcasters, p. 30.

## Recommendations for Future Studies

The following recommendations are put forth for use and consideration by those interested in conducting future studies at college and university radio stations. The recommendations are adapted from those made by the author in the 1995 College Radio Survey cited earlier.

Conduct a pilot study of the survey, provide preliminary results to the client, adjust the survey as needed, conduct an additional pilot study if needed, and then conduct the actual survey. The purposes of the pilot

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* Percentages in each cell of Column 2 were calculated by averaging the number of students receiving the station divided by the total enrollment of each school. Percentages in each cell of Column 3 were calculated by averaging the number of students tuning in at least once a week divided by the total enrollment.



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study are to identify and confirm selected factors inherent in the study itself. Statistical testing of the pilot study responses could be performed in order to analyze the significance of illustrative findings and to establish variable reliability.

Without a pilot study, it is not possible to guarantee that the results provided by the actual survey will be those wanted by client. In other words, without providing preliminary results, it is difficult to determine if the survey is providing the information needed.

To this end a schedule would be as follows:

Client Consultation
Survey Instrument Preparation
Pilot Study Preparation
Pilot Study Conducted
Preliminary Results Provided to Client
Additional Pilot Study (if needed)
Finalization of Actual Survey Instrument
Mail Out/Phone Survey Conducted
Mail/Telephone Follow-Up
Final Telephone Follow-Up
Survey Complete
Surveys Coded
Date Entry
Data Analysis
Report Development
Report Delivered to Client
Conference Focus Group

Review the survey dates to ensure that semester (school) dates are appropriate for population survey. Surveys involving colleges and universities show that timing is crucial. In order to generate the greatest possible number of completed surveys, it is critical that survey dates coincide with school dates. Ideally, surveys should be conducted within the following time periods:

September-November
February-April

Summer dates are unpredictable and not recommended.

Survey a prorated sample within the population. Statistically, it not required to sample the entire population. In the selection of the sample, an appropriate size for a simple random sample (n) needs to be determined for the population (N). The appropriate sample size for the survey is derived using a population and a sample size for permissible error (proportion) and a predefined confidence level (typically 90%, 95%, 98%, and 99%) (McCall, 1982, p. 330).

Normally, an initial return rate is projected from the sample size. In order to compensate for loss and to

increase the sample size proportionately, an adjusted sample size for the expected rate of response (na) could be calculated utilizing the preliminary estimate of the sample size (n) and an expected rate of response expressed as a proportion (Pr). Thus, utilizing the formula na = n/Pr (McCall, 1982, p. 205), an increase in the sample size to adjust for nonresponses (underestimate) could be available (na) and provide the actual number of initial surveys.

The simple random sample (na) could then be selected by numbering all potential sample analysis units (N) and conducting a random sample without replacement utilizing a computer-generated set of random digits. Random digits would be selected until the sample needed (na) was obtained.

Finally, if the study is commissioned by an outside organization, consider using corporate letterhead in mailed surveys. This can provide a source of increased returns as the respondent is communicating with a well-established organization. Caution should be used in this technique as it could appear that the client commissioned the study with intended results. Additionally, any biases toward the

client or the organization need to always be considered in undertaking any survey (Sauls, pp. 49-52).

## A Final Thought

Concerning ratings in general, Dain Schult provided some insight into the perceptions of a station's performance when he wrote in 1995:

> Of course, the argument for having tangible yardsticks with which to measure your station's performance certainly has merit. Everyone needs a hopefully objective report card to gauge performance and listener satisfaction. However, when ratings become the end-all, be-all of a station's existence, the question then becomes, "Is the tail wagging the dog?" (p. 43)

Thus, as college and university radio stations utilize commercial rating services, they should also consider the impact that such results could have on programming.

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